

Interview with Mr. Charles Robert Schmitt

Veteran of the Navy

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Narrator: This is the United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Kansas. Our guest is Mr. Charles Schmidt, who was born July 17, 1926, at Great Bend, Kansas. My name is Joel Setzkorn, and I will be interviewing him along with Derek Habiger and Josh Petty in the English Composition II class. Mr. Schmitt served in the Navy during World War II.

Narrator: So you weren't drafted or you were?

Schmitt: I was drafted. Yes, sir.

Narrator: Would you have gone into the Navy if you weren't drafted?

Schmitt: Probably . . . probably not. My interest was in farming.

Narrator: When you were drafted, were you kind of upset or did you just take it?

Schmitt: Oh, at that time it was the normal thing. In July on my 18th birthday the law required that I sign up for the draft; then I went for my physical at Leavenworth. About 30 days later I was called in for induction which was in the Kansas City area.

Narrator: Did you go to boot camp right after you were drafted or was it more of a training camp?

Schmitt: Once you were drafted and passed your physical, you went to where they assigned the branch of the service that you'll be in. I would have preferred the Air Force that I put down as my choice, but then I was assigned to the Navy. Then I went to Farragut, Idaho for boot camp.

Narrator: How long was that?

Schmitt: It was three months in boot camp.

Narrator: After boot camp were you sent overseas?

Schmitt: After boot camp I took some more aptitude tests and then I was assigned as a gunner's mate in the anti-aircraft division. I was sent to school in Bambridge, Maryland for three months. We had intensive training on anti-aircraft guns, firepower. We were preparing for the anti-aircraft division.

Narrator: When did you go across to Europe?

Schmitt: I was never assigned to a ship or foreign duty. It was all state-side after graduating from AATC school. I was assigned to Princes Neck, Rhode Island which was an anti-aircraft base training center. I was an instructor. We taught recruits for about three weeks how to operate these anti-aircraft guns. The recruits then rotated and went aboard ship. The next crew would come in for training, and we would have night firing along with daytime firing. My specialty was the 40mm. quad, which was a four-barrel gun 40 millimeter shell which would explode by impact or pre-set with shrapnel. Our targets were mostly towed windscreens or radio controlled drones. And once in a while we would hit a wayward seabird.

Narrator: What kind of Navy vessels were you on?

Schmitt: I was never assigned to a vessel.

Narrator: Oh, you weren't. . .

Schmitt: We were probably . . . we would have had three months, at least three, as an instructor training the crew. They seemed like they were big burdens for the gun crews to bear. You're quite expendable when you have to face the enemy's incoming shell or when suicide planes hit the ship. Your body doesn't have much protection in gun turrets. They got to have replacements. We had to serve our time that way. But then at that time we were looking forward to being assigned to a ship. At your age we were a little cocky. We were tired of shooting at tow socks and drones. We wanted to shoot these kamikazes. They had only enough gas to fly their airplane into the ship. You darn better hit them or else they'll hit you. I guess they were foolish enough to believe that was the thing to do. At that time we thought we never got that opportunity. Now I figure that the good Lord or luck was with us.

Narrator: Did you want to go overseas?

Schmitt: Oh, yes. I wanted to be assigned to a ship to do what we were so superbly trained for. During training I might mention that we knew every part of that gun by feel. We could dismantle it blindfolded, put it together again blindfolded as there were no lights on the ship you know for security reasons. We knew every part and the ID number on it so we call down the number and they could send it up from the bottom hold and we would replace it on the AA gun. That was part of our job, to keep the guns in good order. Being captain of the gun crew, that was part of the job.

Narrator: How long did you serve in the Navy?

Schmitt: From October '44 to July '46.

Narrator: Did you make a lot of friends while you were there?

Schmitt: Oh yes. Whoever we worked with we worked as a team . . . some more than others. Team sports, basketball. As a team it's part of your survival.

Narrator: So you put your trust in them and they put it back in you?

Schmitt: We were taught that. We were taught so many things in boot camp . . . That's for accountability. During morning muster, in order to sign off, a Chief Petty Officer would come by and address you and get your serial number and so forth. He would address you, "Sign off Schmitt." You would salute and repeat your serial number 9578503. I think most remember theirs. "Mine is not to reason why, mine is but to do or die, seek and destroy, kill or be killed." That's the mind set they taught us.

Narrator: Are you still in contact with any of those you made friends with while you were there?

Schmitt: I have one buddy that I went all through the service with. His name is Harvey Stegman. He lives out in Colorado. His health isn't very good. We had one reunion in Farragut. I didn't make it that time. Probably a third of them are still living. Not many of them were there at the reunion.

Narrator: So would you suggest that we join the military? Do you think it helped your character?

Schmitt: Oh, yes, I came out a lot more of a man than I would have been had I not gone. We certainly learned discipline . . . they pressed you to be your best. Of course that's what we thought we were. I am sure we were.

Narrator: Would you encourage us to go join or, would you, say Navy or . . .?

Schmitt: I think in the Navy at least you know you had a dry place to sleep. Everything is so different now. Back then I would have encouraged you to join, but now it's more technical, like our sights on our guns were gyros. The faster the plane went, the more the gyro recessed and the more lead you get on your target. You could see where the warheads would explode whether above or below the target and the shrapnel would fly every direction. You didn't need to have a direct hit. You had to get it to explode in the close area of the airplane. Shrapnel would then disable the plane, or kill the pilot, or bring the plane down. . . .

Narrator: When you left, was your family sad that you were drafted?

Schmitt: Of course they were sad . . . they were proud. There were five of us boys. We all went through the service. They had their boys pretty well disciplined when they returned. They all did well.

Narrator: Did you have free time?

Schmitt: Oh we had some free time. We had a lot in boot camp. We didn't get much weekend pass time as there were nine companies in our oval. Whoever had what we called the rooster head, that had the cleanest barracks or didn't have soiled linens or clothes, got to stand by your bunk and have . . . (Phone ringing) modern technology, but we would stand inspection. Of course we had what was called the head, which was the bathroom that had all brass knobs that we would keep shining. Your clothes were folded just right. Whichever camp had that, had the cleanest or most orderly, got the day off, but our camp never got that . . . (Phone ringing and powering down.)

Narrator: Was your boot camp very strenuous?

Schmitt: It was very strenuous.

Narrator: What were some of the things you did while you were there?

Schmitt: We made like we were kind of like we were in a recovery team, which had a dual purpose. We unloaded off an army train from Kansas City. It took two days to arrive there at two in the morning. They lined us all up, told us to strip off all our clothes and shower and come back and line up. We all stood there naked. They told us we were all lower than . . . on the bottom of the ocean and they would bring us back up from there which they did or tried to. Some were homesick naturally and those that rebelled learned that they had better follow orders than rebel. You did not talk back or you would pay the price. We learned to fire a rifle, a 30.06. I was taught combat with swords and to fight for survival. I always did like hunting jackrabbits and my rifle ability was quite high. I suppose that's why I was chosen to become an aircraft gunner's mate. We also did a lot of fire drills. We had to. At one time as part of our training they had a mockup ship flooded with diesel fuel and set fire with a lot of black smoke. There were three of us. We would get the fire hose to put out the fire. I never saw it but sometimes before our turn they got a little too fast and had a flashback, which is a fire behind. They worked very hard but they lost that crew. . . It was never expounded about but they told us about it—whether it was a caution to protect us or it actually happened or been possibly a cautious fear. That would be part of our training, fire control, a lot of swimming and how to survive, what to get hold of if you have to jump ship when the ship went down, where to swim to get out of the turmoil so you didn't get sucked down with the ship. Things like that.

Narrator: Were you trained to withstand torture?

Schmitt: Oh, I don't really recall that we did. We were all just loyal. Your life . . . "The slip of a lip will sink a ship." Code word . . . Careful what you say if you were to go on leave and go to the bar.

Narrator: When you got out of boot camp, you went to train other people coming into boot camp?

Schmitt: No. I went to anti-aircraft training school at Bainbridge, Maryland. We learned the firepower of different anti-aircraft guns . . . How did that work? Powder and all that good schnaz. Wasn't something I think I'd use later in life, but you do what they tell you and serve where they send you. If it's in harm's way, I would have gone. Had the atomic bomb not dropped in August of '46, '45 I guess it was! And then we didn't train any more crews and we demolished the base. Fired all of our shells out to sea. That was our orders. Then we spent some time in Boston, while they decommissioned the base. That's where we kind of felt left out; we did not get to go where the action was. I guess we were very fortunate, because it would have been very costly to take on Japan.

Narrator: Do you think that the service should be mandatory?

Schmitt: Today I think it is attractive enough. The pay scale is good enough, and it's good training. There are a lot of different benefits for joining. Everyone gets to choose their own career.

Narrator: When you came back, did people show you much respect?

Schmitt: They really did then; we were all well respected in World War II. You really did not need a car. If you were a serviceman and you wanted to go some place for the weekend, most people would stop and give you a ride. Even invited us to dinner sometimes in their homes.

Narrator: World War II was widely supported. How do you feel about the war in Iraq?

Schmitt: I think it's necessary, but we got into something we didn't expect it would be. Perhaps, maybe we don't hear all the good things that happen. Since we are there we need to finish the job. The sooner they will be able to run their own government, the sooner we are able to get out of there. We are slow about getting that done, and they are doing the right thing by demanding that they get their act together so we can get out of there.

Narrator: If you were able, would you have signed up for the war today?

Schmitt: If I was a young man, yea, I probably would. They say 2,000 and something lives have been lost over there. I think the cause is noble and the benefits for the rest of your life are tremendous. I know they have good VA health benefits, which I would not have had if I had not been in the service. And it's a different experience, which is an honor for your country.

Narrator: Talking about your benefits, what did the military do to your religion?

Schmitt: I don't think there was any atheist, but I was not really in harm's way, but there were even scary things working with anti-aircraft guns, powder, and shells. There are a lot of things that can go wrong. There was a church on the base and most of the personnel that I worked with went to church. They all had some part of religion or belief.

Narrator: What do you think the word "war" means?

Schmitt: The word “war”?

Narrator: Yes, how do you describe it?

Schmitt: War would be . . . ours was the war to end all wars. The Bible says there will always be wars and rumors of wars. I think the Bible is more accurate than the war to end all wars. It’s a shame that man’s inhumanity to man, how we cannot control ourselves. . . Different countries have different beliefs and we have to respect that, which is so different than ours. It’s very difficult to try and pull the whole world together, beliefs, and ways of lives. I hope we can get that, maybe not in my generation, but I hope your generation. That would be your challenge. How to get all the countries to live in peace and respect one another. Fear is the easiest way to rule.

Narrator: Do you think peace is possible?

Schmitt: I’d be optimistic that peace is possible. I hope your generation can find it. I’m convinced that you can. Knowledge begets knowledge. Out of desperation will come new knowledge. Your generation will have a challenge.

Narrator: Do you agree with the support that the United States gives to other countries of the world?

Schmitt: Yes, I agree with the support to some extent. We will also have to consider ourselves. We probably need to give them the tools so they can help themselves. They have nothing to work with, which is the problem. They have no future . . .

Narrator: Are all military branches now all the same or do you think there’s a certain one that is most difficult?

Schmitt: I think there might be some like your . . . some might be more dangerous or more exciting, you know. But I think that they all have their purpose. I wouldn’t put one above the other. We need all of them. They all work together good. That’s my opinion, just like your games and school.

Narrator: What about peace? Do you think we’re closer today than we were back at the end of World War II?

Schmitt: You mean worldwide peace?

Narrator: Yes

Schmitt: I think we got a better handle on it but I think up to now the only difficulty would be that it’s a real challenge, but hopefully I’ve always believed that it would never be a perfect world but we can make it more perfect. Especially people need to live in peace and not be persecuted and not live in fear . . . which the United States hopes to achieve.

Narrator: Would you rather . . . sorry.

Schmitt: Go ahead.

Narrator: Would you rather fight a war back then in World War II where you know who you were messing with or would you rather fight a war now where you just send the missile so far and get the job done?

Schmitt: I would rather fight a war like World War II where you knew where the enemy was and what he could do. Now with the scientific ways of atomic bombs and those terrible weapons that can do mass destruction, it's scary. No one is safe. You can see your securities here at home right there in your airports, in our feedlots with fear of chemical warfare. It's very scary. It's something mental. Your generation is privileged. I'm sure you'll do the best you can. I think you'll succeed. You have the intelligence and the ability to gain knowledge which is modern technology.

Narrator: We would like to thank you for coming here and sharing your thoughts with us.

Schmitt: I appreciate you being here and you're a good generation of Americans that can solve this problem. At least keep it under control and make the whole world a better place to live for your generation and generations to come. My days are just about over.